

## **Spatial Distribution and Location of Catholic Mass Rock Sites in the Diocese of Cork and Ross, County Cork, Ireland**

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### **Abstract.**

Leading historians (Wall 1960; Whelan 1995; Elliott 2009) argue that the spatial distribution of Mass Rock sites in Ireland, during the Penal era, is reflective of areas of extreme Catholic poverty, where no parish chapel existed or where landlords were hostile to the overt presence of Catholicism. This paper argues that such traditional assumptions require revision and concludes that many locations do not conform to the mythical, secluded, upland sanctuaries that have traditionally been depicted and that their spatial distribution is more indicative of settlement patterns reflecting the cultural differences that existed within Irish Catholicism during this period.

**Key words:** Mass Rocks, Ireland, Catholicism, County Cork, Penal Laws

The history of Catholicism is an essential component in the history of modern Ireland. As locations of a distinctively Catholic faith, Mass Rocks are important historical, ritual and counter-cultural sites. Their continued use reflects, and helps reconstruct and legitimise, contemporary Irish identity whilst providing a tangible and experiential connection to Irish heritage and tradition. Within the Archaeological Survey Database of the National Monuments Service for Ireland Mass Rocks are classified as ‘a rock or earthfast boulder used as an altar or a stone built altar used when Mass was being celebrated during Penal times

(1690s to 1750s AD), though there are some examples which appear to have been used during the Cromwellian period (1650s AD). Some of these rocks/boulders may bear an inscribed cross' (Archaeological Survey Database 2010).

The mythology surrounding Mass Rocks tends to symbolise the worst excesses of the 'Penal Laws'. Yet, as Elliott (2000) has pointed out, the impact of the Penal Laws was short-lived and the worst was over by 1730 (Elliott 2000, 170). Since the 1990s, most historians have rejected this traditional 'penal' paradigm with its subtext of a heroic but silenced Catholic nation (Dickson 2004, 38). Yet, so pervasive is the Mass Rock in the image of past persecution that Pope John Paul II spoke of it during his 1979 visit to Ireland and annual celebrations of Mass continue to be held at a number of Mass Rock sites across the whole island of Ireland.

An initial examination of the geographical distribution of Mass Rock sites in the diocese of Cork and Ross, county Cork, has yielded some surprising concentrations and absences in certain areas. The actual locations of these sites have proved intriguing since few appear to conform to the mythical, secluded, upland sanctuaries depicted in early and mid-twentieth century history textbooks and more recently on 'republican' murals. This paper does not attempt to assess the implementation, success or failure of the Penal Laws but, rather, aims to provide one of the most thorough syntheses of available information in respect to Mass Rock sites at a diocesan level and to challenge a number of current academic hypotheses about the nature, use and significance of Mass Rocks in the retention of Catholic identity and practice before, during and after the Penal era.

The Penal Laws were passed between 1695 and 1756, although it may be argued that Ireland's Roman Catholics had remained in a state of suppression from as early as Tudor and Stuart times (Morrill 2012). The degrading and dividing influence of the Penal Laws, enacted

in defiance of a Treaty guaranteeing Catholics freedom from oppression on account of their religion, and without the provocation of rebellion, extended to every field of Catholic political, professional, social, intellectual and domestic life (Lecky 1891, 52).

Connolly believes that it was the political danger posed by Catholicism, rather than its religious, cultural and intellectual failings, which provided the main justification for the introduction of legislation (Connolly 1992, 156). Such historians appear to provide an academic discourse of a somewhat secular nature and few attempts to discuss the link between persecution and the retention of Catholicism. As Donnelly points out, there is a true danger in dismissing the religious aspect of Penal legislation because, in reality, religion permeated every aspect of society, the economy and politics during this period (Donnelly 2004, 120).

The introduction of the Banishment Act of 1697 required all regular clergy, bishops and those exercising ecclesiastical jurisdiction to leave Ireland and their expulsion was carried out in a highly efficient manner. Those regulars such as the Jesuits and Franciscans that remained, or filtered back into the country, found refuge amongst wealthy Catholic families or remained under the guise of secular clergy, eventually registering under the subsequent act of 1704 (Fagan 1993, 34). Such wealthy Catholic families were critical to the geography of religion and settlement in Ireland. During the previous century their power status and extensive information networks had remained emphatically Catholic in ethos and key cities such as Cork had become the centres of what came to be termed the 'recusant church' (Smyth 2006, 363).

Wall argues that, whilst this Registration Act of 1704 ordered all popish priests in the country to register in court, it merely served to grant legal recognition to the Catholic diocesan clergy who thereafter remained free to say Mass, administer the sacraments and

carry out the daily functions of a parish priest (Wall 1961, 13). Yet the Cork county assizes show that this was not the case. Dickson reports that sixty priests in the county were named at the assizes in April 1714. Of these, he identifies that three were already in custody for not having taken the oath and that twenty-six priests had refused altogether to take the oath (Dickson 2004, 55).

The 1709 Act requiring all registered priests to take the oath of abjuration, accepting Queen Elizabeth I as *de jure* and *de facto* sovereign, and denying the right of James III to the throne, was in part a response to an invasion scare in 1708. Only thirty-three priests came forward to take the oath whilst the remainder forfeited any legal status which the Registration Act of 1704 had afforded them. Despite this resulting in a temporary disruption to religious services, with priests going into hiding and Mass Houses closing their doors, such precautionary measures were only short-lived as the law proved impossible to enforce (Connolly 1992, 275-276).

The Penal Laws did not ensure the elimination of Catholicism nor did they result in the mass conversion of Catholics (Bartlett 1990, 2). It is argued (Elliott 2009; McBride 2009) that the Penal Laws were not applied as fiercely as legend would suggest, in fact becoming gradually inoperative as a system of religious repression. Yet, the Penal Laws were successful to some degree in that they managed to limit the public expression of Catholicism. Elliott acknowledges that there were some parts of the country, such as Munster and Ulster, where the Penal Laws were utilised by ‘a particularly bigoted element in Protestant society’ (Elliott 2009, 166). She believes that the impact of the Penal Laws upon the Catholic Church and religious practice has come to define the period (Elliott 2009, 165). Although much has been written about the Penal era, the study of Mass Rocks is a neglected area of study despite their

potential in helping to frame Eighteenth-century Irish Catholicism within a broader economic, social, cultural and political context.

## SETTLEMENT PATTERNS IN MUNSTER

Despite an early English presence in Munster from the twelfth century, much of the province, particularly in the south and west, remained under the control of Gaelic chieftains. By the sixteenth century, the leaders of many of these Gaelic clans were politically allied with the descendants of the original twelfth-century Anglo-Norman colonists, the so-called 'Old English' (Delle 1999, 17). However, as Breen (2007) recognises, 1570 onwards marked the beginnings of increasing English interest in Munster as well as an emergent period of revolt by a number of Gaelic lords. Smyth draws attention to the major changes in the organisation of Irish society that began to take place at this time (Smyth 2006, 346).

In mapping society and settlement in seventeenth-century Ireland, Smyth uses poll tax listings to assess the relative distribution of Gaelic and Old English names in county Cork. He identifies a strength of Gaelic tradition close to Cork city and further reports that the Gaelic hearthland of the south-west was as clear and extensive in 1660 as it had been in 1260 (Smyth 1988, 62). However, by 1660, the power bases of all the lordships had been smashed and the Gaelic or Gaelicised lands of *na Déise*, west Cork, reveal a dispersed population and a scattering of communities (Smyth 1988, 67). In west Cork, both Bandon and Kinsale showed a Protestant majority (O'Flanagan 1988, 126) and, by 1660, Carbery also revealed strong planter elite.

With the exception of Bandon, the New English settlers moved into Cork areas where Gaelic and Old English communities were already mixed (O'Flanagan 1988, 126). Despite this, the class power of the older Gaelic communities remained and many 'still held on to powerful hinge positions in urban and rural social hierarchies and ensured the relative success

of the new landlord-inspired economy would both depend on and be mediated by them' (Smyth 1988, 72). Also relevant, and reflected in the figures from the 1659 census, is the regional diversity, demographic power and resilience of the Old English which Smyth maintains persisted into the first half of the seventeenth century in Ireland (Smyth 2004, 247).

Mapping first and second names Smyth clearly identifies a Gaelic zone of continuity extending into west and south-west Cork. With the exception of a south-western core of planter names, pivoting around Cork city and the Munster plantation precincts, Smyth finds that Old Irish family names predominated (Smyth 2004, 265). Further, he identifies that despite more than a century of war and plantation 'most of the ancient Irish names and their family bearers persisted strongly in their ancestral localities' and he specifically highlights the O'Sullivans and MacCarthys in south west Munster as examples within this category (Smyth 2006, 395). This is of key importance in respect to the spatial distribution of Mass Rock sites in Cork as this paper argues that their use is reflective of a more traditional or Gaelic strand of Irish Catholic culture.

### **ONE FAITH—UNITED BUT DIVIDED**

Using language sources it is possible to identify a shift in the use of ethnic terminology relating to the Old English, new English and Gaelic Irish from Reformation times to the mid-seventeenth century, with a clear shift in the more exclusive term *Gaedhill* which was used to distinguish the Old English from the New English or *Nua-Ghaill* (Smyth 2006, 60). The Old English had founded their own religious houses in Cork and elsewhere soon after their arrival, despite the survival of Benedictine houses at Cashel and Rosscarbery. The religious houses of the Old English excluded the Gaelic Irish and remained distinct from those of purely Gaelic origin throughout the medieval period, being located primarily in Anglo Norman port towns (Meigs 1997, 45). Jefferies' analysis of diocesan possessions between

1485 and 1535 clearly highlights this division (Jefferies 2010, 41). Old English participation within the European reform movement helped them to articulate their very separate identity (Lennon 1986, 89) and the Gaelic Irish continued to harbour a strong hostility towards them (Kelly 1985, 433).

By the seventeenth century, the Gaelic Irish and Old English had evolved into very definable groups (Meigs 1997, 90). However, by the end of the century, the Old English found themselves merged with the mass of the Catholic population (Beckett 1976, 43) with the words 'Irishmen' and 'papists' being used as interchangeable terms (Beckett 1976, 36). However, the country still remained 'highly fragmented' with 'clearly varying and multiple shades of identities' (Smyth 2006, 61). This is reflected in the diocese of Cork and Ross where Mass was celebrated at a number of different venues during the Penal era including open air sites, Mass Houses, Huts or Cabins as well as in private homes.

Bossy points out that the medieval Mass was a composite of two ritual traditions inherited from early Christianity, the tradition of public worship, practiced by whole communities, and that of the private, family, domestic cult (Bossy 1983, 51). Control of church buildings remained firmly in the hands of the state (Lennon 1986, 88) demanding a variety of ritual spaces that reflected both private and communal worship. Walsham maintains that Irish Catholics retained a deep attachment towards spaces and sites that had been violently defaced in the course of the long Reformation, believing that persecution and proscription compelled Catholics to embrace not only the natural environment (Walsham 2011, 155) but also dismantled shrines and redundant churches. Thus the landscape became an arena for individual devotion and collective worship (Walsham 2011, 156). The varying and multiple 'shades' of Catholic identity to which Smyth (2006) refers are clearly discernible in the

spatial distribution of the different venues chosen for worship within the landscape of the diocese of Cork and Ross.

### *The Location of Private Chapels*

In respect to private worship, the *Report on the State of Popery* of 1731 records private worship in a number of parishes throughout the diocese of Cork. They are recorded in Cork city centre locations as well as in the parishes of Christ Church and St. Pauls. A number are also noted in Kinsale, as well as one further chapel in Kilruane parish situated approximately three miles from this port town. The use of private houses is only recorded at one other place outside the diocese and that is in the parish of Rosse, in the diocese of Ross, where Mass was described as taking place in ‘private houses’ although there is no mention of private chapels in the area (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913).

In his analysis of settlement implications upon ecclesiastical structures between c.1550 – 1730, Smyth advises that port towns and cities remained ‘core anchors’ of the counter-Reformation church. He highlights their strong support for its rich liturgical traditions and reports that there were greater concentrations of, and support for, both secular and regular religious (Smyth 2000, 176). Both patronage and protection were offered by wealthy and literate Catholic merchants (Smyth 2006, 371). Significant numbers of Old English remained in the port towns and cities such as Cork, Youghal and Kinsale. Both McCarthy (2000) and Dickson (2004) show that, despite previous expulsions, the population of Old English descent living within the walls of Cork city remained significant during the Penal era. McCarthy records that at least a quarter of the Titulados were descended from Cork city’s Old Catholic merchant oligarchy. This included Old English families such as the Goolds, Skiddys and Ronanes (McCarthy 2000, 46) as well as the Galweys and McNamaras (Dickson 2004, 40). In Youghal, the Coppingers and Terrys were among the families of Old English (McCarthy



2000, 45). Bolster reports that they were also powerful in places such as Bandon, Innishannon and Kinsale (Bolster 1972, 109).

The Jesuits had played a vital role in the Counter-Reformation and their mission strategy often targeted affluent and influential members of Irish society (Jones 1995, 145). Their schools and colleges promoted a positive Catholic image and classrooms became powerful instruments of the Counter-Reformation cause (Jones 1995, 145). Catholic gentry and mercantile families often retained clergy in their homes, providing them with both financial support and protection (Lennon 1986, 82). The *Report on the State of Popery* of 1731 acknowledged that ‘most of the wealthy Papists’ had ‘private Chappels in their Houses, where Mass is often celebrated’ (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 131). This paper suggests that the location of private chapels strongly mirrors the Old English settlement patterns identified by McCarthy (2000), Dickson (2004) and Smyth (2006), reflecting a strand of Irish Catholic culture that was strongly influenced by Jesuit teaching.

#### *The Location of Mass Houses*

Research has revealed that former Old English domination within the port towns and cities is also reflected in the existence of established and substantial Mass Houses. In more rural parishes the *Report on the State of Popery* of 1731 generally describes Mass Houses as ‘mean thatched Cabbins’ with ‘many, or most of them, open at one end’. Those located within port towns and cities are, in contrast, described as being well established, large and, occasionally, sumptuous (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913).

The 1731 report states that the Parish of Christ Church in Cork city had ‘a public mass house’ which had been ‘considerably enlarged and beautified within five or six years last past’ (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 135). It mentions that there were also two new Mass houses in the city. One of these was slated and built in 1728. The other was built in

1730 'on a fine eminence, in a Large sumptuous manner in the north suburbs on a new foundation' despite the fact that there was already 'a Large Convenient mass house before, near the place where the said new mass house is built'. Another Mass house or Chapel existed in the centre of the city and this had been recently enlarged (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 131). In Kinsale there was 'one Mass house' and '.... another house now building' which authorities suspected as being designed for a Mass House (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 140).

In county Tipperary Butler confirms the widespread existence of Mass Houses as early as 1670. In a similar vein to Cork and Kinsale, he emphasises the relationship between these Mass Houses and a safe-house support network of Roman Catholic gentry households. He draws upon a report written to the Vatican, in 1684, highlighting these close links. Of great significance is the fact that this report emphasises that these gentry desired private masses in or near their own houses in order to avoid being associated with open-air masses and other indignities (Butler 2006, 142). The same safe-house support network certainly existed in Cork as authors (Burke 1914; Lennon 1986) have shown, the Old English forming a core area of settlement within port towns and cities such as Cork, Youghal and Kinsale (Smyth 1988; Bolster 1982).

Whilst Old English families had possessed lands throughout Cork, much of the coastal territories of west Cork were controlled by Gaelic lordships (Breen 2007, 21). Such areas show a high preponderance of Mass Rock sites, supporting the hypothesis that the use of Mass Rocks is reflective of a more traditional or Gaelic strand of Irish Catholic culture.

### *The Location of Mass Rocks*

The arrival of Christianity in Ireland could easily have eradicated the existing learning and institutions associated with paganism but, as Mac Cana identifies, this was not the case.

Instead it achieved a remarkable symbiosis between native institutions and modes of thought (Mac Cana 2011, 48). Whilst the arrival of Christianity heralded ‘a sea-change in ritual practice’, its adaptation to the existing social order was aimed at achieving a smooth and unchallenged transition (Ó hÓgáin 1999, 199). The new religious orthodoxy permitted the complementary coexistence of two ideologies within the same Gaelic community; one explicitly Christian, the other originally pagan (Mac Cana 2011, 48). The success of this symbiosis ‘adopting a Christian mould without abandoning the native culture’ is reflected in the cultural distinctiveness of Early Christian Ireland (Bradshaw 1989, 18). Religious sites were cleansed from pagan association by the blessings of the missionaries subsequently becoming a central focus for new religious and secular activities (Zucchelli 2009, 107).

Walsham identifies that, by 1500, the Christianisation of the landscape had all but displaced memories of ancient paganism in Ireland. However, she acknowledges that the notion that nature was invested with sensitivity to the sacred never ceased to test and challenge the Church’s equilibrium (Walsham 2012, 36). This is demonstrated by Meigs who maintains that the characteristics of late medieval Irish Catholicism were impacted significantly by the inter-relationship between the Catholic Church and the *aos dána* poets. These poets belonged to a learned class of scholars and enjoyed a position of high status within Gaelic society. Meigs argues that this symbiotic relationship was ‘indispensable to the process through which the counter-Reformation was able to enter Ireland and disseminate its reformation ideologies among a receptive population’ (Meigs 1997, 77).

Walsham proposes that ‘the bible provided a rich repertoire of iconographical motifs connected with the natural environment and supplied plenty of evidence that it was the setting for sublime spiritual experiences’ (Walsham 2011, 39). Whilst paganism tended to view physical locations as inherently sacred, Walsham points out that Christianity was reluctant to

accord such sanctity to certain places within the landscape. Instead, through those writers and poets recording the lives of the saints in medieval Ireland, Christianity created ‘a tissue of topographical legend to explain the appearance of the physical landscape’ (Walsham 2011, 43).

By the time of the Penal Laws the Catholic political culture of west Cork is described by Smyth as ‘predominantly (but not exclusively) Irish speaking ..... oral and manuscript based, with rich traditions and practitioners of bardic poetry, genealogical, historical and legal scholarship, *dinshenchas* and the keeping of annals’. He argues that this fostered strong cultural unity and regional diversity. Catholics in these hearthlands knew the lands of their ancestors intimately and nurtured a potent belief in ‘the place of poetry and the imagination, the spiritual world and “older” faiths’ (Smyth 2006, 61). This paper proposes that such knowledge and tradition was highly influential in respect to the choice and location of Mass Rock sites.

There is already substantial evidence that shows an intimate link between Ireland’s shrines and topographical features or natural vegetation features. Nolan (1983) identifies that at least ninety-two per cent of Ireland’s shrines are ‘intimately’ associated with such features including several at Ballyvourney in county Cork. He emphasises the high prevalence of holy-water features and sacred stones at Irish pilgrimage sites. Sacred stones, particularly megalithic monuments and natural rock formations are nearly six times more common in an Irish pilgrimage context than elsewhere in Europe (Nolan 1983, 431). Nolan concludes that Irish pilgrimage almost certainly has stronger pre-Christian roots than pilgrimage elsewhere in Europe (Nolan 1983, 432). Only thirteen per cent of active Irish shrines postdate the Reformation (Nolan 1983, 436) demonstrating that older traditions have predominated. The

location of Mass Rock sites clearly echoes Nolan's findings as there is robust evidence of an engagement with topographical features and nature.

The symbolism reflected by the element water occupies a most important place amongst the sacred spaces of many nations (Radimilahy 2008, 86) and Ireland is no exception. The power and regenerative force of water is acknowledged as an important aspect of Irish mythology as it played a central role as a creative force in the cosmic religiousness of pre-Christian communities (Brenneman & Brenneman 1995, 22). The distribution of Mass Rock sites in the diocese of Cork and Ross shows a close correlation between Mass Rock sites and water sources. Raftery (1994) identifies that rivers figure prominently in Celtic mythology and a significant number of Mass Rock sites are located adjacent to streams and rivers such as those at Kilshinahan and Glenville (Plate 1).

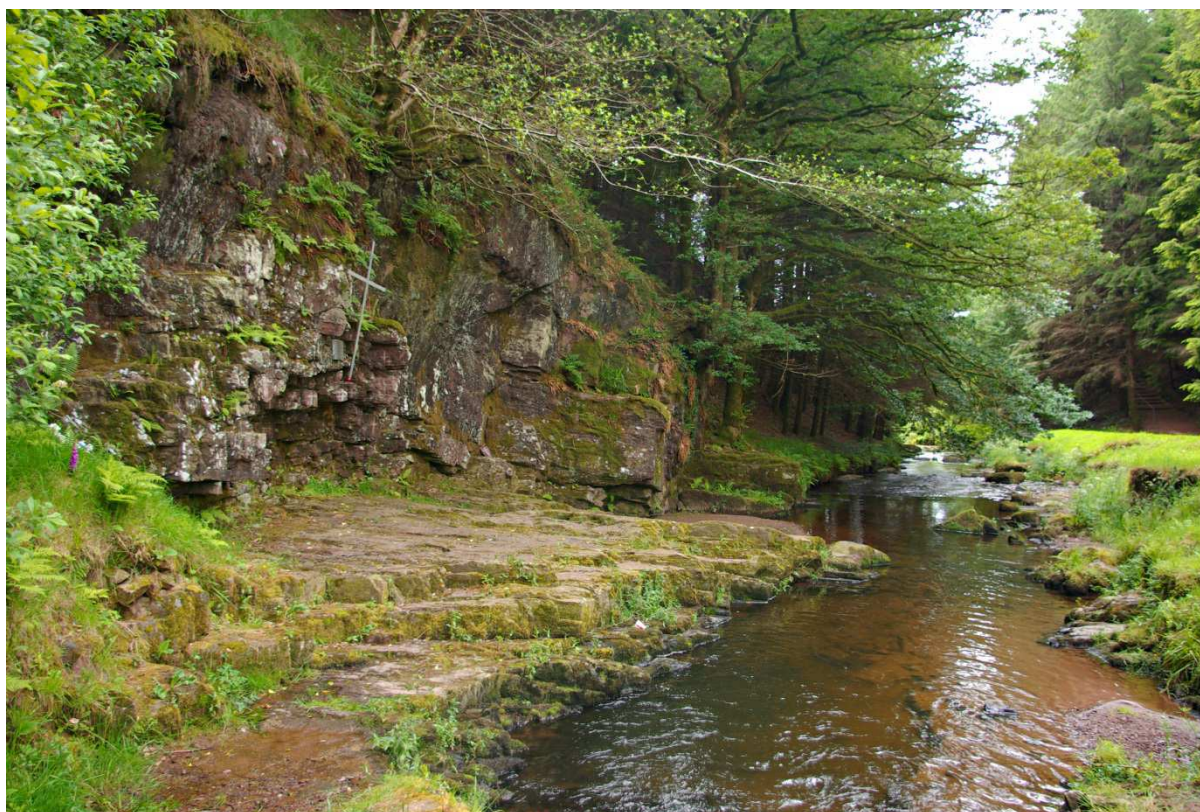


Plate 1. Glenville Mass Rock at the edge of the River Bride (Photo by the Author)

Walsham (2012) identifies that, in Ireland, Holy Wells were widely regarded as locations where supernatural power was especially potent so it is not surprising that a number of sites are located beside Holy Wells. The Beach Mass Rock, which is found beside Lady's Well in Bantry, is one such site (Plate 2). Other Mass Rocks are situated close to lakes such as those at Coornahahilly and Curraheen in Inchigeelagh, whilst some, such as Mishells, are found in close proximity to fords. Many ancient Celtic battles were staged at fords because they were believed to be places of crossing and transformation (Brenneman & Brenneman 1995, 22).



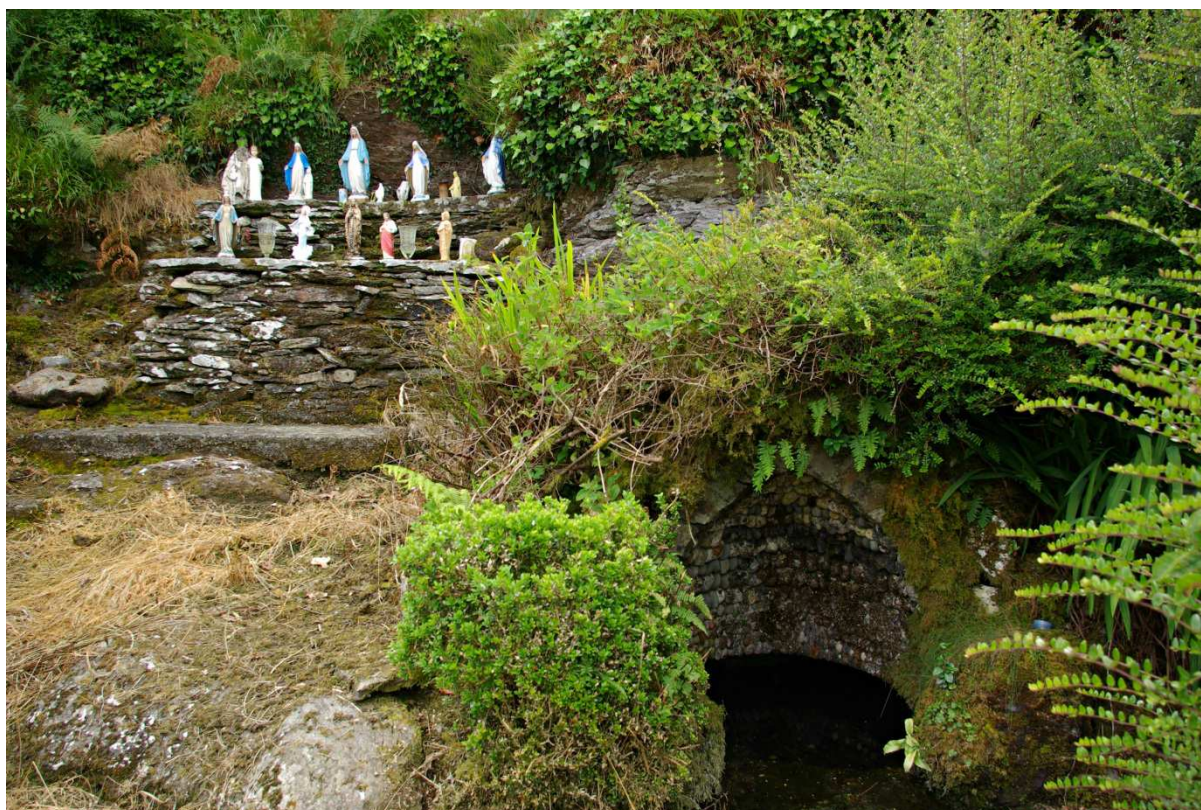


Plate 2. Beach Mass Rock in close proximity to Lady's Well, Bantry (Photo by the Author)

The sacredness of stone is clearly apparent in its use as an altar and, according to Moss, stone has always been the preferred material for altar use although there is some evidence for the use of wooden altars during the later middle ages (Moss 2006, 81). The large number of Mass Rocks that utilise natural rock formations is strong evidence that sites were often chosen because of specific topographical features. At Ballyshoneen, in the diocese of Cloyne, Mass was celebrated at a rock face that resembled a human face in profile. The Mass Rock at Gortnahoughtee (Plate 3), known as *Carraig an tSeipeil* (Rock of the Chapel), resembles a small chapel whilst at Cúm an tSagairt (Hollow of the Priest), in Ballingeary, the Mass Rock is an unusually shaped prow-like boulder which stands in an isolated position within a natural hollow in the landscape (Plate 4).





Plate 3. Gortnahoughtee Mass Rock also known as Carraig an tSeipeil, Inchigeelagh (Photo by the Author)





Plate 4. Cúm an tSagairt, Ballingeary (Photo by the Author)

Cooney highlights the fact that some areas in Ireland had already become ‘special’ places in the Neolithic period and that these have remained the scene of continuing attention in archaeology, history and mythology, as people have referred back to their past (Cooney 2008, 34). Cooney’s observations have specific relevance to the location of Mass Rocks sites, particularly in Cork, where archaeological monuments such as ringforts, stone circles and wedge tombs were re-used and re-interpreted during the Penal era at sites such as Cooldaniel, Derrynafinchin, Drombeg and Toormore (Plate 5). This practice is certainly not confined to the Cork area and similar examples can be found in other counties including a re-used wedge

tomb at Scrahallia, Cashel, Connemara (Cooney 1985, 134) and the Srahwee or Altoir Wedge Tomb in Clew Bay, county Mayo (Plate 6).



Plate 5. Toormore Mass Rock, Schull, Cork (Photo by the Author)



Plate 6. Srahwee (Altoir) Wedge Tomb, Clew Bay, Mayo (Photo by the Author)

The Shehy Beg Mass Rock is situated high on a south facing slope in the Shehy Mountain range. Its location, close to the old Cork Butter Path, would have meant that it was previously far more accessible from Coolmountain townland and the Keakil Valley than it is today (Ryan 1957, 26). This area is prolific in archaeological monuments comprising fourteen hut sites, two enclosures and a bullaun stone. This was already an established ritual landscape when the Mass Rock was constructed suggesting that this site was chosen specifically because it was already considered to be a ‘special’ place by the local community.

## **SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION OF MASS ROCK SITES**

### *Mass Rocks in the Modern Day Parish of Clonakilty*

When Lewis completed his topographical survey of Cork, in 1837, Clonakilty was described as ‘an incorporated seaport, market and post-town ... in the parish of Kilgariff ... situated on the Gorar or Farla river, which falls into the bay close to the principle street, and in a pleasant fertile valley environment by hills of moderate elevation, which descend to the harbour’ (Lewis 1837, 111-112).

Clonakilty has had a long and turbulent past. The area was once part of the *Tuath Ó nDúngalaig*, a territorial division belonging to the *Corcu Loígde* (Ó Corráin 1993, 71). A strip of their territory, extending from Ballincarriga to Clonakilty, belonged to the O’Hurleys who were tributaries of the McCarthy Reaghs (O’Leary 1975, 32). Originally known as *Tuath-na-Coillte* (or *gcoillte*) meaning the ‘tuath of the woods’ (Holland 1949, 158), these lands had passed to the powerful Anglo-French Barry family around the time of Henry II. However, the lands were subsequently lost to the MacCarthys of Duhallow, in the northwest, and to the Desmonds, in the east (Nicholls 1993, 176).

The area was heavily settled by New English, as a result of the Munster Plantation, and not as a result of Anglo-Norman colonisation. The town itself did not come into existence until 1620 when these lands, having been originally granted to Sir Walter Raleigh (Buchanan 1986, 89), passed to Richard Boyle, Earl of Cork. In addition to Clonakilty, Robert Boyle also assisted in the establishment of additional settlements at Enniskeane and Ballydehob (Breen 2007, 120). The town is first highlighted in the wars of 1641 when the town's charter was carried by the English inhabitants as they fled to Bandon to protect themselves (Lewis 1837, 111-112). Work has been undertaken on the 1641 depositions, which record witness testimonies concerning their experiences of the rebellion, by Canny. He identifies that 26 of the deponents who came forward from the parish of Kilgariff generally belonged to the town of Clonakilty thus confirming a sizeable English settlement there (Canny 1993, 256).

In 1691 the town was again attacked as Irish troops rallied in support of James II (Lewis 1837, 111-112), suggesting a core of established Gaelic resistance within this area. The exclusion of the town from the 1731 *Report on the State of Popery* suggests that authorities were not aware of the presence of any Mass Rocks in the parish. However, research has revealed a number of sites within the vicinity indicating that the location of Mass Rocks at Drombeg, Dungannon, Councambeg, Knockatlowig and Tawnies Lower is testament to the tenacity of Gaelic Irish Catholics living within this parish.

#### *Mass Rocks in the Modern Day Parish of Dunmanway*

East of Drimoleague, Dunmanway parish is a union of the ancient parish of Fanlobbus and certain townlands from Ballymone. It is situated between Ballineen, Coppeen and Rossmore. The area has a very ancient parochial history as Fanlobbus is mentioned among the churches of the diocese as early as 1199 (Cork and Ross Dunmanway ID 27 (2011) Diocesan website). O'Donovan believes that the valley in which the town now sits may have been known

previously as *Dun-Maonmuige* or the ‘Fort of the Noble Valley’ (O’Donovan 2004, 1). In tracing the history of the area he refers to an entry within the *Annals of the Four Masters* referring to the McCarthy Reagh of Kilbrittain. Their castle of *Dun-na-mbean* was built on the banks of the *Abhainn Sallaigh* or the Sally River but was subsequently forfeited in Cromwellian times (O’Donovan 2004, 2).

The modern day town was not founded until around 1700 when Sir Richard Cox, Lord Chancellor of Ireland, built a mansion there for his residence. He also obtained the grant of a market and fairs in the area (Lewis 1837, 231-232). By 1738, the area had not yet blossomed into the flourishing mill town it was to become and Richard Hedges, a new settler in Macroom, reported that ‘from Dunmanway to Canturk which is 40 miles of barbarous country there is not an English gentleman of note that lives there, except Wm. Browne, minister of Macromp’ (Hedges (1738) cited in Whelan 1995, 13).

The landscape here is relatively rich in Mass Rock sites. The parish website records a Mass Rock site at Ardcahan with two further sites listed in Behagullane. An additional site at Kealiriheen, *Cumainán na hAltárach* (Little Hollow of the Altar), is described as being in a secluded hollow. A Mass Rock at Ballyhalwick is reported as the most picturesque of all the Penal sites within the district. In addition a further site is identified in Gurteensownee near Gearannbawn Rock close to *Ath an Aifrinn* or the ‘Ford of the Mass’. Other sites are present in both Ballinacarriga and Togher. At Togher, sites may be found at Kinrath, Shiplock and Cooranig and at Ballinacarriga in Lisheenlish, Upper Thoam, Gortnamuckla and Clashnacrona (Cork and Ross Dunmanway ID 27 2011).

The *Schools' Manuscript Collection* of the Irish National Folklore Collection has a number of entries concerning the area which highlight several potential additional sites. These include ‘a big stone called the ‘Mass Rock’ in the townland of Nedineagh and ‘a field called the



‘priest’s field’ in the townland of Moreigh where Mass was also said in the open’. The record advises that there ‘is no altar to be seen there but it is said that the altar was made of timber and it rotted after a time’ (S303, 299). There was clearly a strong continued Gaelic presence in this area duly reflected in the large number of Mass Rock sites identified, through field work, as being located within this parish.

### *Mass Rocks in the Modern Day Parish of Bantry*

Bantry, otherwise known as West Land and comprising the (later) parishes of Kilmow, Soole (Schull), Kilcrohane, Durris, Kilmacomoge (Bantry) and Caheragh, was originally part of the territory belonging to the O’Mahoneys (Bolster 1972, 1). Bolster identifies that three districts of Iffanloe were tuath lands belonging to the O Mahoneys. It is unusual for early tuath parishes to survive intact down to modern times but the parish of Bantry is a good example of such continuity. Bantry evolved from the *tuath* of the *Beanntraigh* into the barony of Bantry. This in turn became the basis for the ancient parish of Bantry and Kilmocogue (Bolster 1972, 262).

The Bantry area was eventually settled by the New English during the Munster Plantation. Breen has undertaken considerable research in respect to the west Cork landscape. He advises that Bantry witnessed two primary waves of planters in the seventeenth century; the first in the very early part of the century associated with the pilchard entrepreneurs and a second group that arrived during the period of the Commonwealth and the initial years of the Restoration in the 1650s and early 1660s (Breen 2007, 47). Once a Gaelic hearthland, the decline of status and power among the Irish is very evident in Bantry. The O’Sullivan Beare tower houses, once central features of the west Cork landscape, were replaced by mansions. These were built at Reenadisert outside Bantry overlooking a small shallow sheltered inlet (Breen 2007, 131). Subsequently, during the primary phase of Cromwellian activity in the

Bantry/Beara area, all O'Sullivan Beare lands were confiscated (Breen 2007, 133). However, some family members survived as chief tenants under the new Protestant elite (Breen 2007, 48).

Many land grants were bought by Protestants in order to create very large estates. The lands of the *Mac Fínn Duibh*, for example, passed to Sir William Petty (Breen 2007, 48). In 1671 Arthur Earl of Anglesey obtained a grant of the forfeited estates of the baronies of Bere and Bantry under the Act of Settlement. These estates included Arnagashell, Ardneturish, Comeholly (Coomhola), Kilcaskan, Glangarrufe and Island, Berehaven, Derehin, RossMcOwne, Loughanbegg, Argroome, Coulagh, Ballydonogane and Abbey Land. As Breen identifies, the earl had essentially received all of the lands of the former O'Sullivan lordship and was, in fact, to hold them for the next century (Breen 2007, 135). By the onset of the Penal Laws the area retained a strong Protestant presence.

The *Report on the State of Popery* of 1731 reports three 'Mass-houses or thatch'd cabbins'; one in Kilroe and two in Skull. These can only have been rudimentary shelters because, whilst their position remained fixed and Mass was celebrated in them, they were 'frequently rebuilt'. There was a further hut or cabin covering an altar in Caheragh which is reported as having been fixed in the same place for many years (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 130-141). Research has revealed a plethora of Mass Rock sites located in this parish. Indeed, Father Henchy records a total of twenty one sites in the townland of Caheragh alone (cited in Carey 1957, 99). Given the ancient pedigree of this parish, it may be argued that such a preponderance of Mass Rock sites is indicative of the remnants of a strong Gaelic presence within the area.

*An Acceptable Middle Ground*

Despite the differences that clearly existed between the two Catholic cultures, the role of the Franciscans, in promoting a middle ground between the more ‘traditional’ strand of Gaelic Catholicism and that of the Jesuit style counter-Reformation Catholicism, needs to be addressed. Munster had always been an area where the Franciscans were strong (Bolster 1972, 432). Prior to the Reformation there had been thirty Franciscan Observant Friaries in the province, far outstripping numbers of Augustinian and Dominican houses (Bolster 1972, 447). Research undertaken by Gillespie demonstrates that the Franciscan order in Ireland had undergone a dramatic transformation by the end of the seventeenth century. Whilst it had shrunk to a small fragmented organisation by 1600, a century later he reports that it was a ‘well-established’ body with almost 600 members by 1700 (Gillespie 2009, 75).

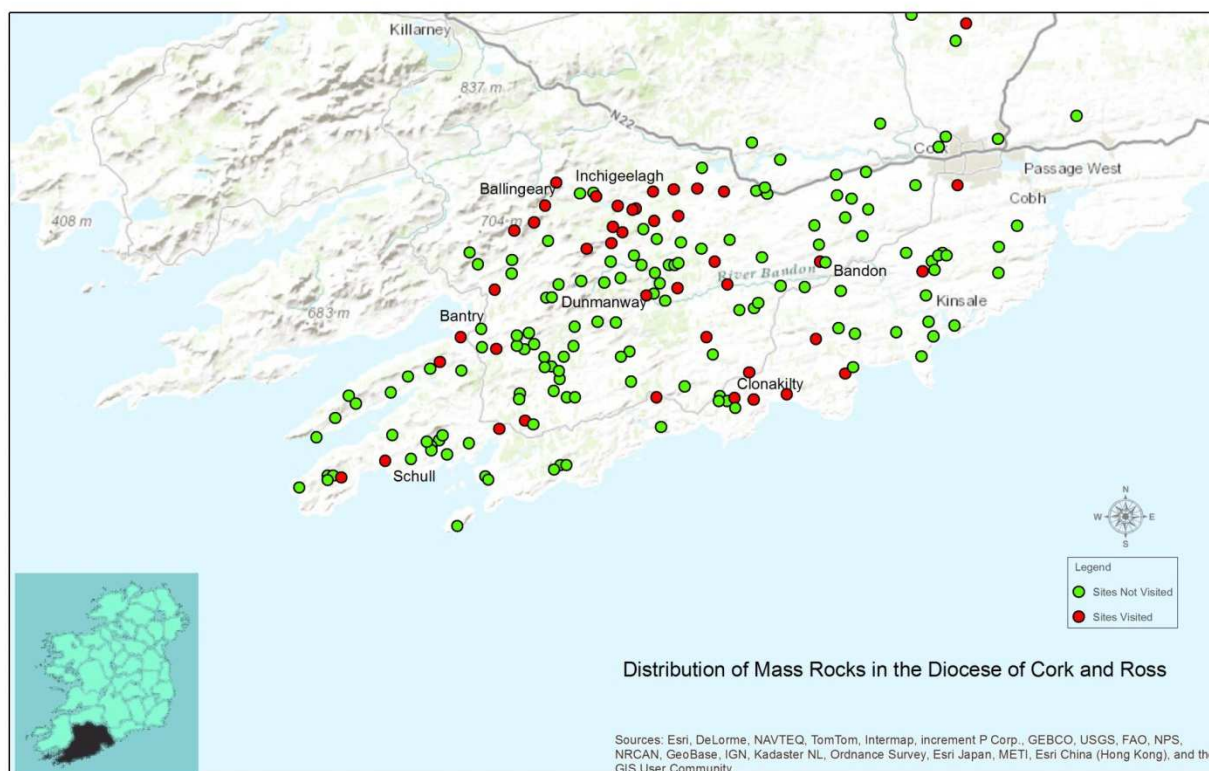
Gillespie believes that their success was due, not only to their vision of themselves as distinctively Irish and distinctively Franciscan, but also to the fact that many were trained in Europe (Gillespie 2009, 75). Gillespie writes that ‘the genius of the Franciscan order in seventeenth-century Ireland was ..... its ability to recognise the changing needs of successive generations of seventeenth-century Irish people and to maintain support from the ethnically diverse groups that the order served in that changing world’ (Gillespie 2009, 76).

There is both temporal and spatial evidence to show that the use of Mass Houses and Mass Rocks was not mutually exclusive. As already discussed, there were a number of large and sumptuous Mass Houses in Cork city which is expected given the strength of Old English settlement there. However, in the *Report on the State of Popery* of 1731, the curate reports on his enquiries within his own parish of ‘St. Finbarry Corke’ that priests also officiated in ‘private houses’ as well as ‘open fields’ close to the city (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 134). Whilst there was also a strong Old English presence in Kinsale, it is evident from



the *Landed Estates Database* that Gaelic families such as the O'Driscolls and O'Mahoneys lived in juxtaposition alongside Old English families such as the de Courcys and Galweys (Landed Estates Database NUI Galway Galway/Galwey Estate 2011). There was a Mass House in the port town of Kinsale, in addition to two houses that had 'private Chappells in them' where priests often celebrated Mass. Another building was being erected that the writer, John Jephson, believed to be a further Mass House. However, there were also two other places where the Papists assembled 'but have not any house or walls' (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 140).

It is clear from the *Report on the State of Popery 1731* that some Mass sites remained in their original location for a considerable period of time whilst others were frequently moved or rebuilt. In the parishes of Dromaleague and Caheragh there were two reported sites with one 'often removed from place to place ..... the one now in being is scarceley of six months standing'. The movable celebration of Mass was also a feature in Desert Surges parish where it was reported that 'Mass is often said in several places in this parish, it was not very long ago near to the Parish Church' (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 136). Yet in Skull parish, there were 'fixed places for celebrating Mass' (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 140). The fact that Mass Rocks were temporally and spatially mutable may go some way in explaining the significant number of Mass Rock sites that have been identified during research. Using a synthesis of historical, geographical, archaeological, folklore and oral sources it has been possible to expand the potential number of Mass Rock sites in the diocese of Cork and Ross to 181 (Map 1).



Map 1. Potential Mass Rock sites, Diocese of Cork and Ross, County Cork

## REVISITING TRADITIONAL ASSUMPTIONS

*Mass Rock sites are Confined to Areas of Extreme Catholic Poverty, Where No Parish Chapel Existed or Where Landlords Were Hostile to the Overt Presence of Catholicism*

It has been repeatedly argued by leading historians (Elliott 2009; Whelan 1995; Wall 1961) that Mass Rock sites were confined to areas of extreme Catholic poverty, where no parish chapel existed or where landlords were hostile to the overt presence of Catholicism. The historical evidence for this viewpoint would seem to lie in the words of the Archbishop of Cashel. Whilst writing to the Vatican, in July 1684, he declared that, in Cashel, Roman Catholics still held land where Mass-houses were erected. However, in a few unspecified upland parishes and due to a combination of poverty and opposition of ‘heretics’ to providing

mass-house sites on their estate, he reported that pastors celebrated Mass on movable altars in the open air (cited in Butler 2006, 142). Yet, McBride believes that the customary image of Catholicism throughout the Penal era, as a religion of the poor, requires adjustment (McBride 2009, 230) and I propose that the distribution and location of Mass Rock sites, at least in the diocese of Cork and Ross, certainly supports an alternative view.

### Poverty in the modern day parish of Bandon

The modern parish of Bandon is a union of Ballymodan, Kilbrogan and a few townlands from the ancient parish of Desertserges, including Bandon Town. In Irish the parish is known as *Droichead Ui Mathuna* (village/town of the O'Mahoneys). This name refers to the O'Mahony sept (Cork and Ross Bandon ID 10 2011) who took the land from the O'Driscoll's, *Uí Drisceoil*, at the Battle of Morrahin, near Kilcoe, in 747AD. The O'Mahonys settled around Bandon and subsequently obtained lands throughout the Mizen and Sheep's Head peninsulas (Daly 2004, 6).

The heritage of south-west Munster was a mixed one which underpinned the most innovative and wealthiest overseas English settlement anywhere in the seventeenth century. Towns such as Bandon, described as 'Munster's most shining example of a successful plantation town' (O'Flanagan 1988, 125) became pivotal to future colonisation within the area (Smyth 1988, 76). When Cromwell arrived in 1649 he declared Bandon to be 'a fine sweet town and an entire English plantation without any admixture of Irish' (cited in Bolster 1982, 218). By 1685 Protestant control of head leases in Bandon was virtually total (O'Flanagan 1988, 127). Even Gaelic owned lands were often leased to the New English settlers. This process slowly diluted Gaelic control in the area (Breen 2007, 36). Dominated by the New English, the Established church became pre-eminent in Bandon during the early

decades of the seventeenth century. Two churches were built in the area; Christ Church in 1610 (Breen 2007, 82) and Ballymodan in 1614 (Breen 2007, 84).

Research, by O’Flanagan, shows that the town remained predominantly Anglican from 1659 until the mid-1770s (O’Flanagan 1988, 128). Even after this date, Bandon retained its exclusive Protestant character with Catholic residences almost totally absent within the old walled sector of the town. He observes that there were no Catholic institutions present within a one mile radius of the town’s walls (O’Flanagan 1988, 131). Canny’s work, in respect to the 1641 depositions, also reveals an English presence in a contiguous line of relatively dense settlement in the valleys of the rivers Blackwater, Lee and Bandon (Canny 1993, 254), suggesting that such areas ‘were more densely settled with migrants from Britain than any area of comparable size in the province of Ulster’ (Canny 1993, 256).

By the onset of the Penal Laws, O’Flanagan confirms that those Catholics living in Bandon were ‘invariably marginal’ living, for the most part, in lowly cabin dwellings (O’Flanagan 1988, 127). This area was clearly strongly Protestant and its Catholic community relatively poor. If historians are correct in their assumptions that Mass Rock sites are situated in areas of extreme poverty or where landlords are hostile to the overt presence of Catholicism then one would expect a significant number of Mass Rock sites to be located within this particular parish.

The *Report on the State of Popery* in 1731 records ‘no reputed Mass house or popish Chapel. The reputed priest ..... when he says mass it is only in some private Cabbin’ (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 139). Research has identified only one confirmed Mass Rock site in Bandon, that of Corravreeda East, where a stone known locally as a Mass Rock was broken up and buried in the 1970s (Archaeological Survey Database 2012). It is possible that Bandon parish is simply an anomaly. However, a lack of Mass Rock sites in this

parish contradicts traditional assumptions concerning their presence in areas of extreme poverty or where landlords were hostile to the overt presence of Catholicism.

### Wealth in the modern day parish of Kinsale

In contrast to the Catholics in Bandon, those living in or near Kinsale appear relatively wealthy. The Catholic community was sufficiently affluent to be in the process of building a second Mass House in 1731, having already built the existing Mass House in the town. If traditional assumptions are correct, one would not expect to find Mass Rocks in an area that was so affluent. However, this is not the case. Despite a number of alternative places for worship, the use of Mass Rock sites continued in parallel with worship at Mass Houses in this particular parish.

### *Mass Rocks Are Found in Secluded Upland Settings*

The actual locations of Mass Rock sites are equally intriguing. Less than a quarter of sites visited during research conformed to the mythical, upland sanctuaries depicted in early and mid-twentieth century history text books. The image of an upland scene depicting worship at a Mass Rock was also one of the earlier images to appear on more cultural murals introduced after the ceasefires of the 1990s (Plate 7). The painted image, found on the gable end of a house in Ardoyne Road, Belfast, is almost a carbon copy of that painted by Reigh (1884) entitled *A Christmas Mass in the Penal Days – The Alarm!* which appeared as a free Christmas supplement to the *United Ireland* newspaper of 20<sup>th</sup> December 1884 (United Ireland 1884). In 1933 a further painting was completed by a Dublin Fireman, James Conway, and entitled *The Mass Rock*. A photograph of the artist and his work was published in the July issue of the *Irish Independent* and, similarly, depicts a priest celebrating Mass with a small congregation in an upland setting (*Irish Independent* 1905).



Plate 7. Mural, Ardoyne Road, Belfast (Photo by the Author)

Despite such pre-conceptions, in the diocese of Cork and Ross, relatively few Mass Rock sites are found in upland mountain settings or at high elevation. The majority of sites are found within fields or pastureland or situated within wooded glens and gallery woods. Reports within the *Schools' Manuscript Collection* support the rich variety of locations identified during field research. One entry reveals the presence of a Mass Rock in Borlinn in a 'lonely isolated glen' (S282, 114). In Kilbrittain 'on the eastern slope' of *Gleann na mbrathar* or Friars Glen, another entry reveals that 'a rough table has been cut in the rock'. While this Mass Rock was on one side of the glen, between the Mass Rock and the stream was 'a green level patch where the people knelt during Mass' (S313, 306a).

The *Schools' Manuscript Collection* also records open air sites in fields throughout the diocese; a Mass Rock is reported in Kilbrittain 'In James O'Mahony's field of Cloundereen' (S313, 150) and in Inchafune, in Ballinacarriga, where there is a report of 'a field in which Mass was celebrated in the days when priests were hunted'. The reader is informed that the field still bears the name *Páirc na tSéipéil* or Field of the Chapel (S303, 298).

Other entries, however, do reflect the tradition image of Mass in the mountains. One child records that two priests passed through Drinagh to say Mass in a hidden place in the mountain which was known as *Conacán na Holóracs* or the Little Hill of the Altars (S303,195). Another child locates a Mass Rock on Round Hill mountain in the parish of Dunmanway (S303, 298). Further entries confirm that in Penal times Mass was said on the side of *Cnoc Buide* (Yellow Hill) in west Cork (S281, 133) and on the top of hills near Bantry (S281,165) and in the Mealagh Valley (S281, 425).

### *The Evolution of the Mass Rock Tradition*

Whelan identifies the 'open air' phase of worship as the first stage in the history of modern chapel building in Ireland and proposes that, contrary to popular belief, 'this episode was brief and spatially restricted'. He does, however, highlight isolated pockets where open air Mass survived for a long period of time, arguing that such pockets were confined to areas with hard-line landlords such as Dundrum and Templemore in Tipperary or in areas of extreme poverty such as the Ballingearry area of west Cork (Whelan 1983, 6).

O'Riordan's research in county Laois confirms that such hard-line landlords did exist. He reports that Lord Castlecoote inserted a clause prohibiting a tenant from providing any site for a Catholic chapel, school or priest's residence in each of his leases. This resulted in Catholics of the parish of Castletown, two miles from Mountrath, worshipping at a thatched house built on a sandbank in the river Nore (O'Riordan 1999, 461). In county Clare the

Church of the Little Ark, in Kilbaha, holds the only surviving ‘ark’ from Penal times. The ark was an altar-like structure that was carried or rolled on to the beaches in some coastal areas. It was placed within the tide marks where Mass could be celebrated on land was not technically owned by landlords (Donegal Public Art 2014). Elliott also acknowledges that in some parts of the country, such as Munster, the Penal Laws were utilised by ‘a particularly bigoted element in Protestant society’ (Elliott 2009, 166). Such views are supported by the location of a Mass Rock at East Ferry, in Cork. Situated on the Great Island side of the strand, here too the congregation would have stood on the sandbanks with access to the site dictated by the tidal flows of the river.

However, research in Ballingeary, does not seem to support Whelan’s suggestions that isolated pockets remained where open air Mass survived for a long period of time due to the poverty of the area. If this was the case then one would expect to find a high preponderance of Mass Rock sites in Ballingeary. However, only two Mass Rocks were identified during research as being located in *Béal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh* (Ballingeary); Kilmore Mass Rock and that at *Cum an tSagairt* (Hollow of the Priest). In contrast there were a significant number of Mass Rock sites in neighbouring Inchigeelagh where Ó Murchadha (1993) documents the existence of ‘good farmhouses’ and a ‘slated’ dwelling amongst approximately 130 ‘cabins’ by 1700. By the mid-seventeenth century, slate houses were considered to be around five times more valuable than chimney houses (O’Flanagan 1993, 406). Additionally, the inhabitants of Inchigeelagh and neighbouring Kilmichael were sufficiently affluent to support three ‘popish’ schools and two priests as recorded in the *Report on the State of Popery* in 1731 (Catholic Historical Society Ireland 1913, 135).

One other reason given for a preponderance of Mass Rock sites is an absence of parish chapels or landlord hostility to the overt presence of Catholicism. Land was clearly available for the erection of Mass Huts, and subsequently Penal Chapels, in *Uíbh Laoghaire* (Iveleary)



as demonstrated by sites located at Rossmore and Currahy in Inchigeelagh. There is robust evidence to show that Mass Rocks in this parish were already being replaced by 1753 and a carved stone at *Séipéal na Glóire* (Chapel of the Glory) near to the Currahy Mass Rock is testament to this. A small stone built structure, believed to be a Mass hut, was also recorded during research located in a field opposite the shrine at Rossmore.

Despite the availability of these buildings, Mass Rocks continued to be used in this parish well beyond these dates. A Mass Rock at Carriganeela was used by locals up to the 1950s and the Curraheen Mass Rock is believed to have been used up until the appointment of Father Holland as Parish Priest in 1816 when its use was superseded by Mass in a private cottage in the village prior to the building of the Catholic church in 1842 (Ryan 1957, 27).

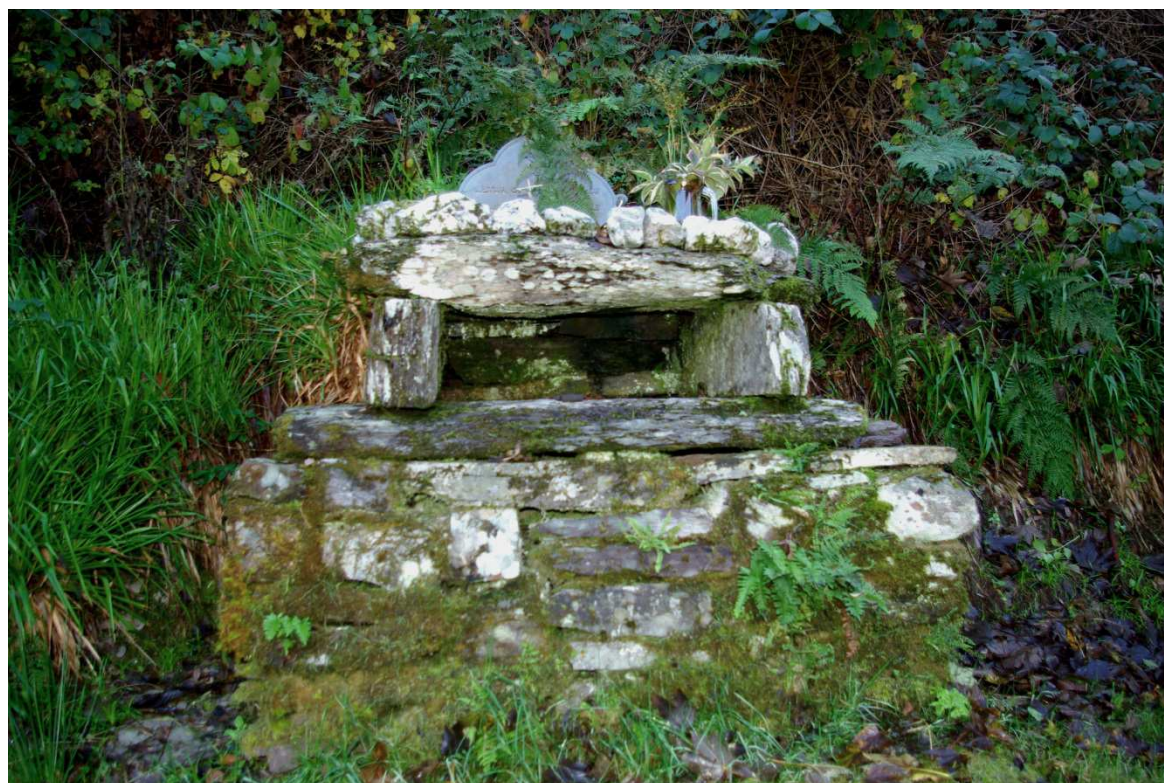


Plate 8. Curraheen Mass Rock, Inchigeelagh (Photo by the Author)

Today the physical expression of reverence or veneration toward these sacred places is demonstrated by the continued celebration of Mass at Mass Rock sites throughout the country

and by the bodily involvement of the Eucharist. In *Uíbh Laoghair*, Mass is celebrated annually at the Curraheen Mass Rock (Plate 8) and was celebrated during the Millennium at the ruined Penal chapel at Currahy, *Séipéal na Glóire*, by the local history society *Cumann Staire Bhéal átha'n Ghaorthaidh* (Ballingeary Historical Society).

## CONCLUSIONS

The mapping of the spatial distribution of Mass Rock sites in the diocese of Cork and Ross, county Cork, challenges a number of traditional assumptions that have been made concerning their location. This paper proposes that they are not predominantly located in areas of extreme poverty, where no chapel was available as an alternative place of worship or where landlords were hostile to the overt presence of Catholicism. Instead, it suggests that the spatial distribution of Mass Rock sites is reflective of a more traditional or Gaelic strand of Irish Catholic culture within the diocese. Further, it cannot be assumed that the majority of Mass Rock sites are found in secluded upland settings, as depicted in mid-nineteenth century history text books and on modern day Republican Murals. The location of sites, instead, reflects the varied topography of the landscape and a close engagement with nature. Mass Rocks may also be found in fields and pastureland, wooded glens, gallery woods, ravines and in coastal areas. The coastal nature of sites is reflected in other counties such as Galway where the spatial distribution recorded within the Archaeological Survey Database shows a majority of sites as situated on or near the coast (Archaeological Survey Database 2012).

As Nugent (2008) argues, the memory of religious association of certain spaces remained a strong focus for the Gaelic Irish and it appears that this is reflected in the location of Mass Rock sites within the diocese of Cork and Ross. Here a number of ritual archaeological monuments continued to be selected for the celebration of Mass throughout the Penal era. This is not unique to Cork and research in county Mayo, which has an entirely different

settlement history to Cork, has revealed a number of such sites at Callow, Clogher and Srahwee. There are a further six Mass Rocks situated along the *Tóchar Phádraig* in Mayo, a route regularly followed by pilgrims from Ballintubber Abbey to Croagh Patrick (Ballintubber Abbey 2006). This association ensures that Mass Rocks remain a focus for contemporary society. When Redwood Church was renovated in 1978 the Mass Rock at Moatfield, in the parish of Lorrha, was removed from its original site and placed in the sanctuary of the church (Murphy 1991, 21). Similarly, a Mass Rock was installed as the altar in the new confessional Chapel of the Cistercian Order at Our Lady of Bethlehem Abbey, Portglenone, in county Antrim (*Irish Independent* 1973). Such continued use reflects, and helps reconstruct and legitimise, contemporary Irish identity whilst providing a tangible and experiential connection to Irish heritage and tradition.

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